

A TEMPLAR BOOK

This edition published by Derrydale Books, distributed by Outlet Book Company, Inc., a Random House Company, 225 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003.

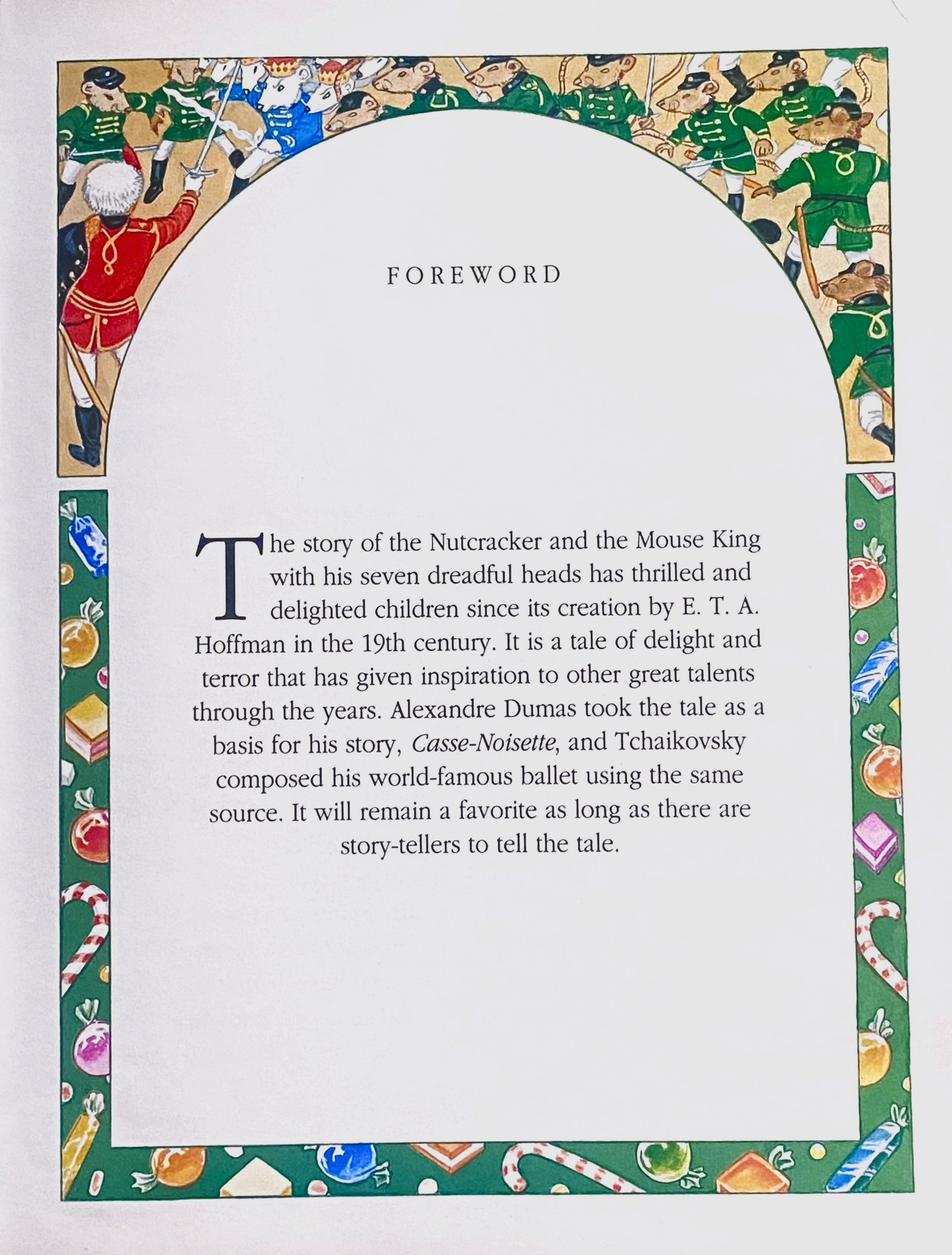
Devised and produced by The Templar Company plc, Pippbrook Mill, London Road, Dorking, Surrey RH4 1JE, Great Britain.

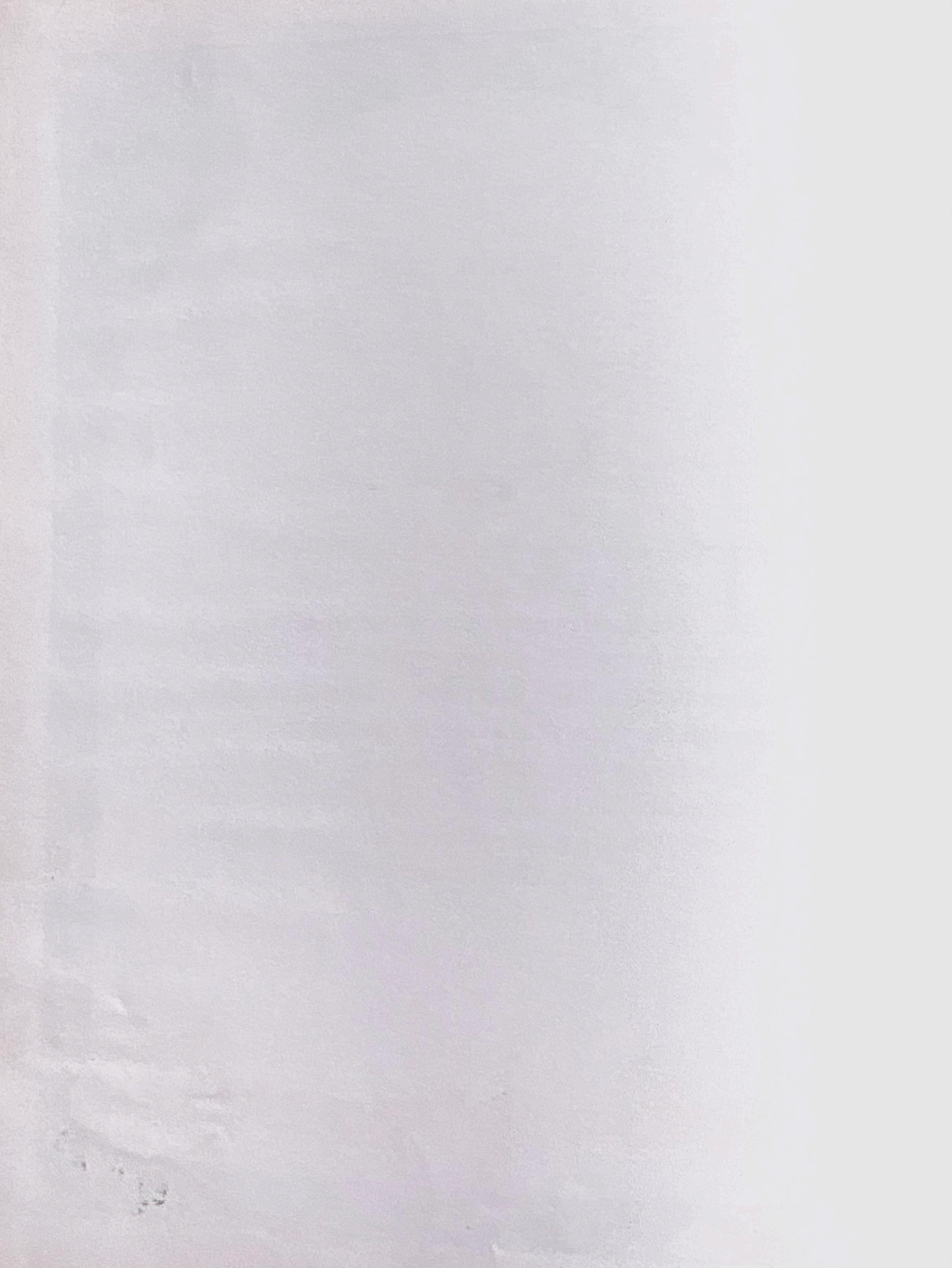
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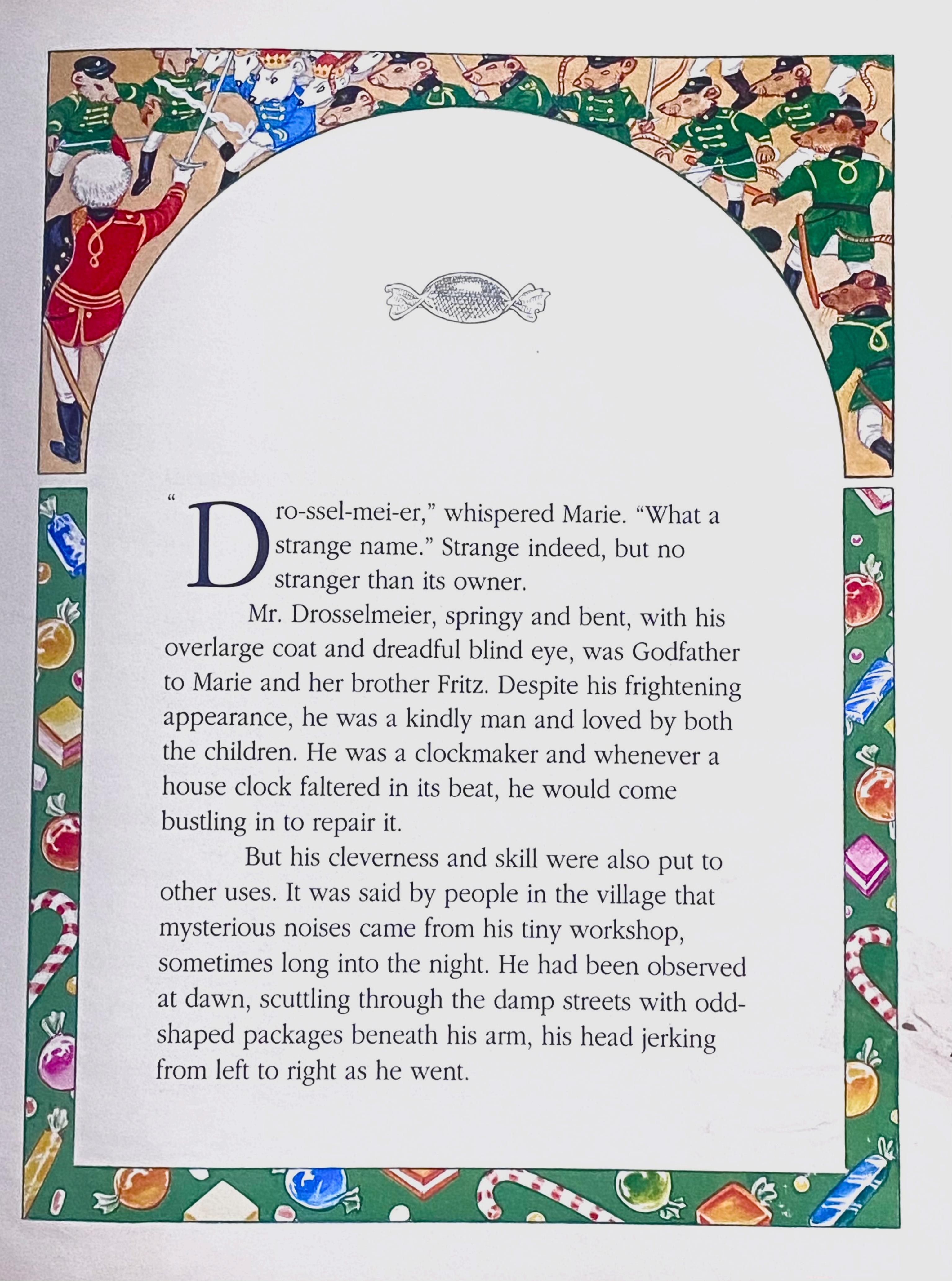
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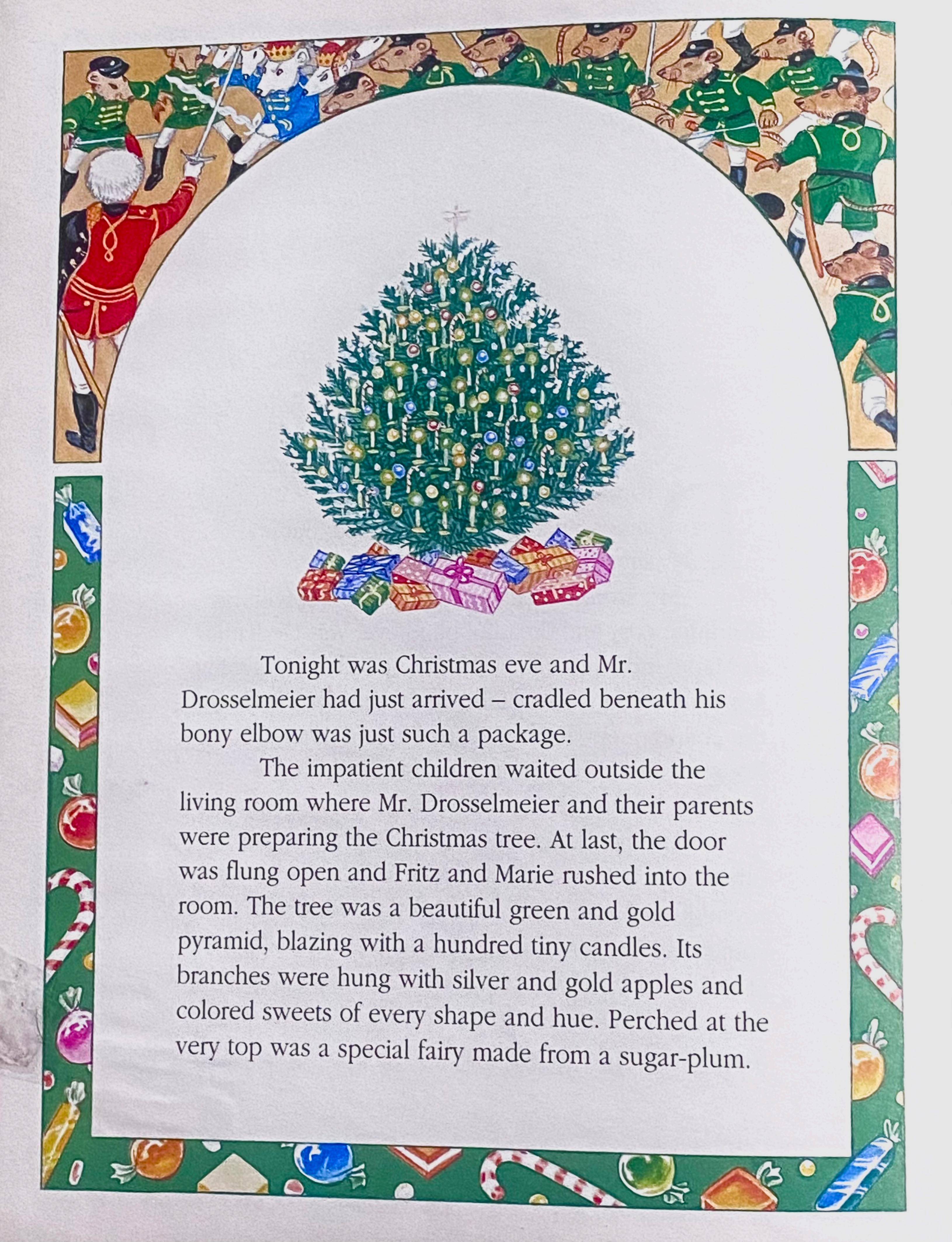
Edited by A J Wood
Designed by Mike Jolley
Printed and bound in Malaysia

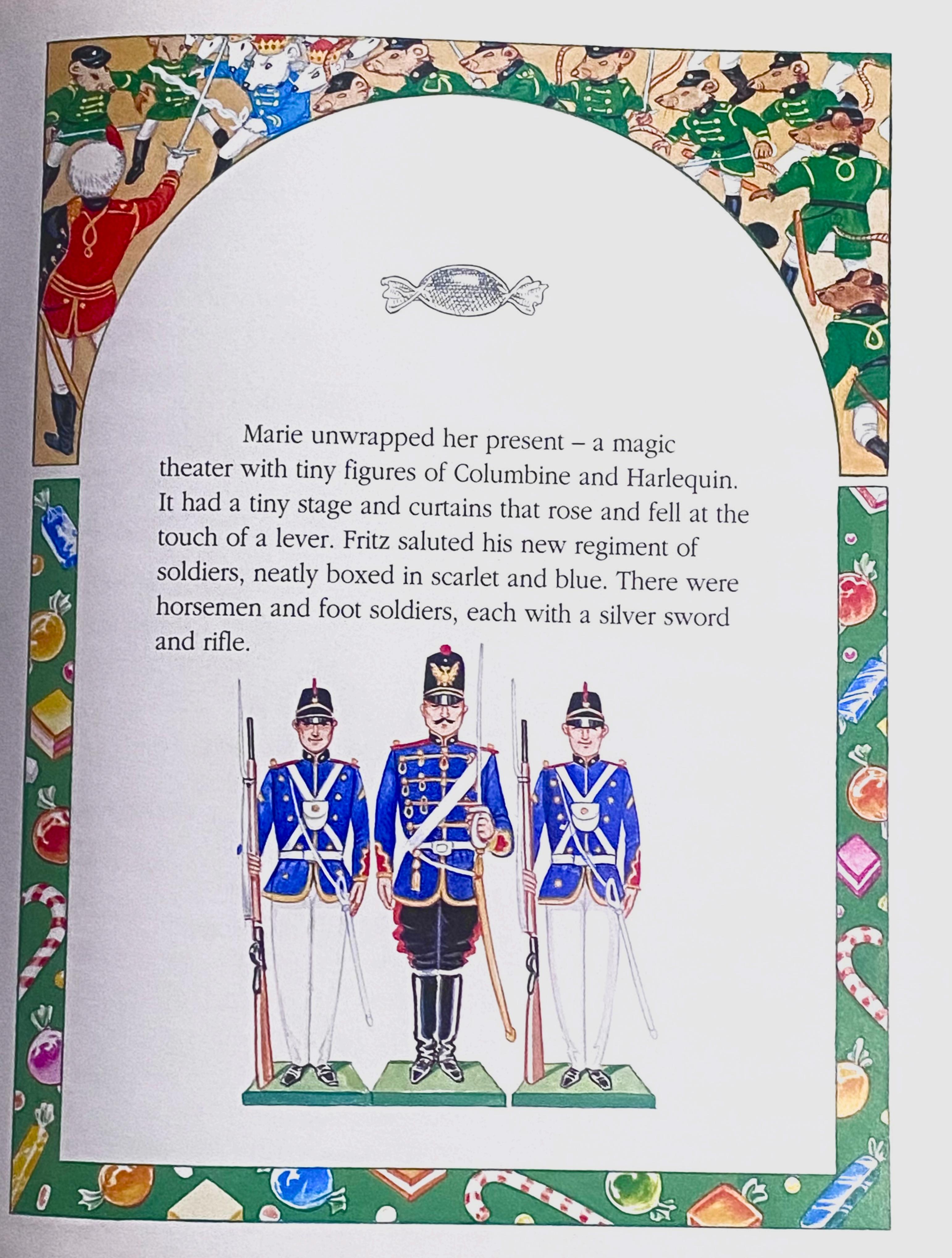
ISBN 0-517-06694-7 87654321











Hidden in the shadows beneath the tree stood another figure – the contents of Mr. Drosselmeier's strange package. Marie lifted it into the light.

It was a carved wooden soldier made by her Godfather – a hussar in brilliant uniform. His head was large with a strong jaw, but his kind face was curiously handsome. He had a short body balanced on stubby legs. Yet despite his odd stature, Marie thought him very smart. On his head he wore a tall officer's hat of white fur and his scarlet tunic was richly encrusted with gold braid. His white breeches were tucked into shiny black boots.



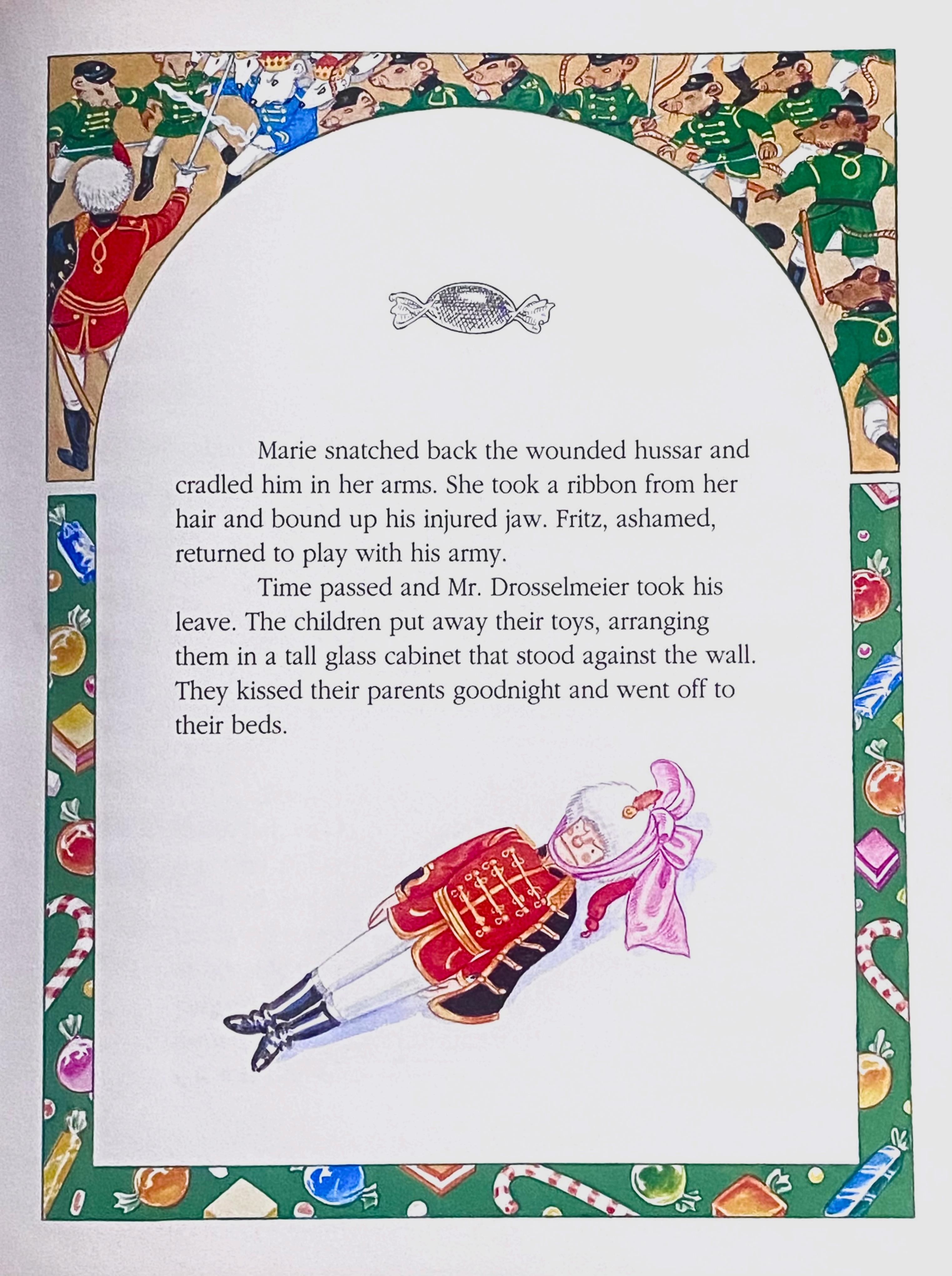
"What a handsome fellow," said Marie, lifting him up. At once, Mr. Drosselmeier sprang to her side, glad that his latest creation was being admired so by his Goddaughter.

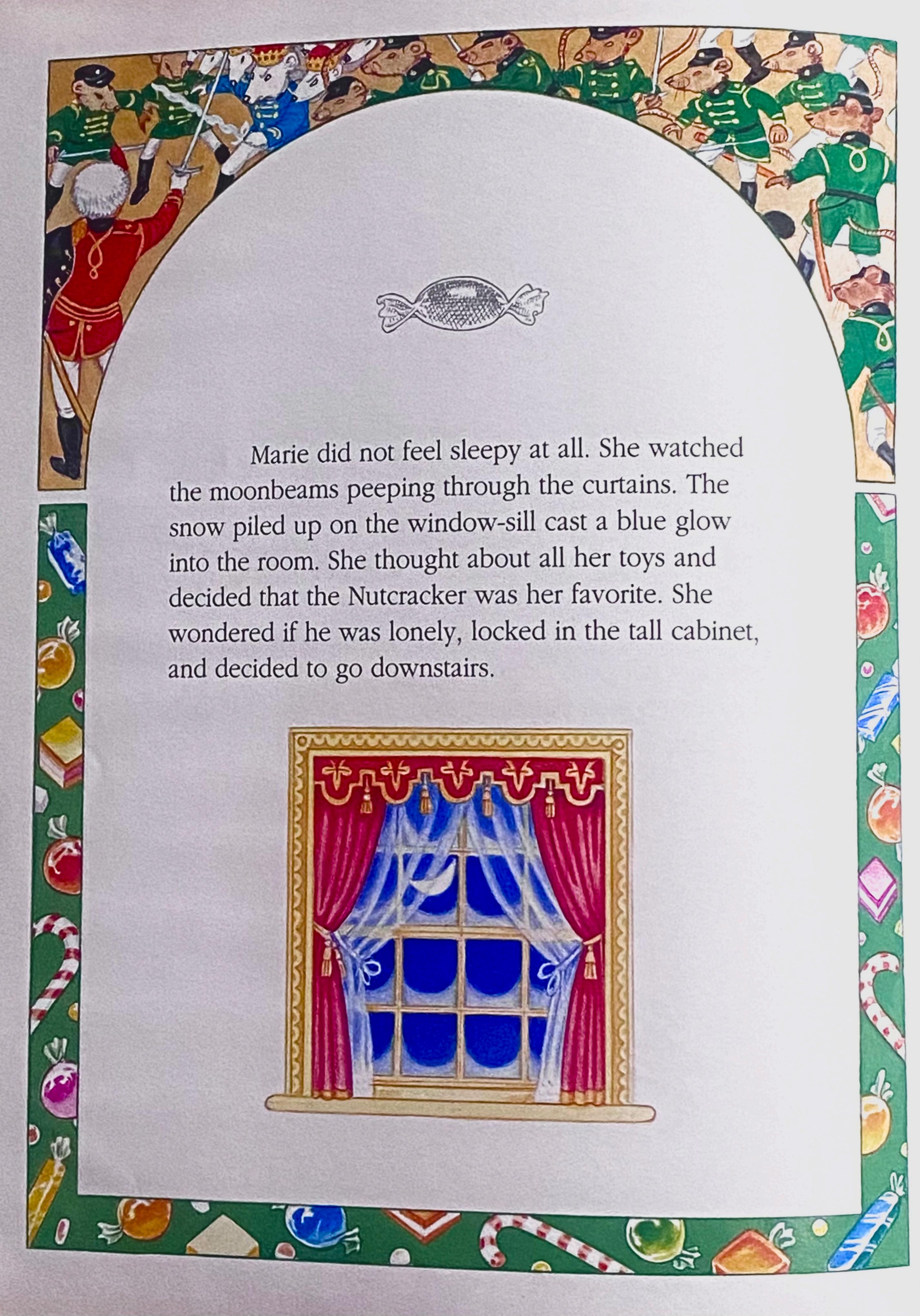
"Ah, but watch this, my child." There was a faint click as he lifted the collar of the soldier's tunic. The strong jaws snapped open revealing two rows of sharp white teeth. Mr. Drosselmeier popped a nut between the teeth and – snap! The hussar promptly split the nut in two.

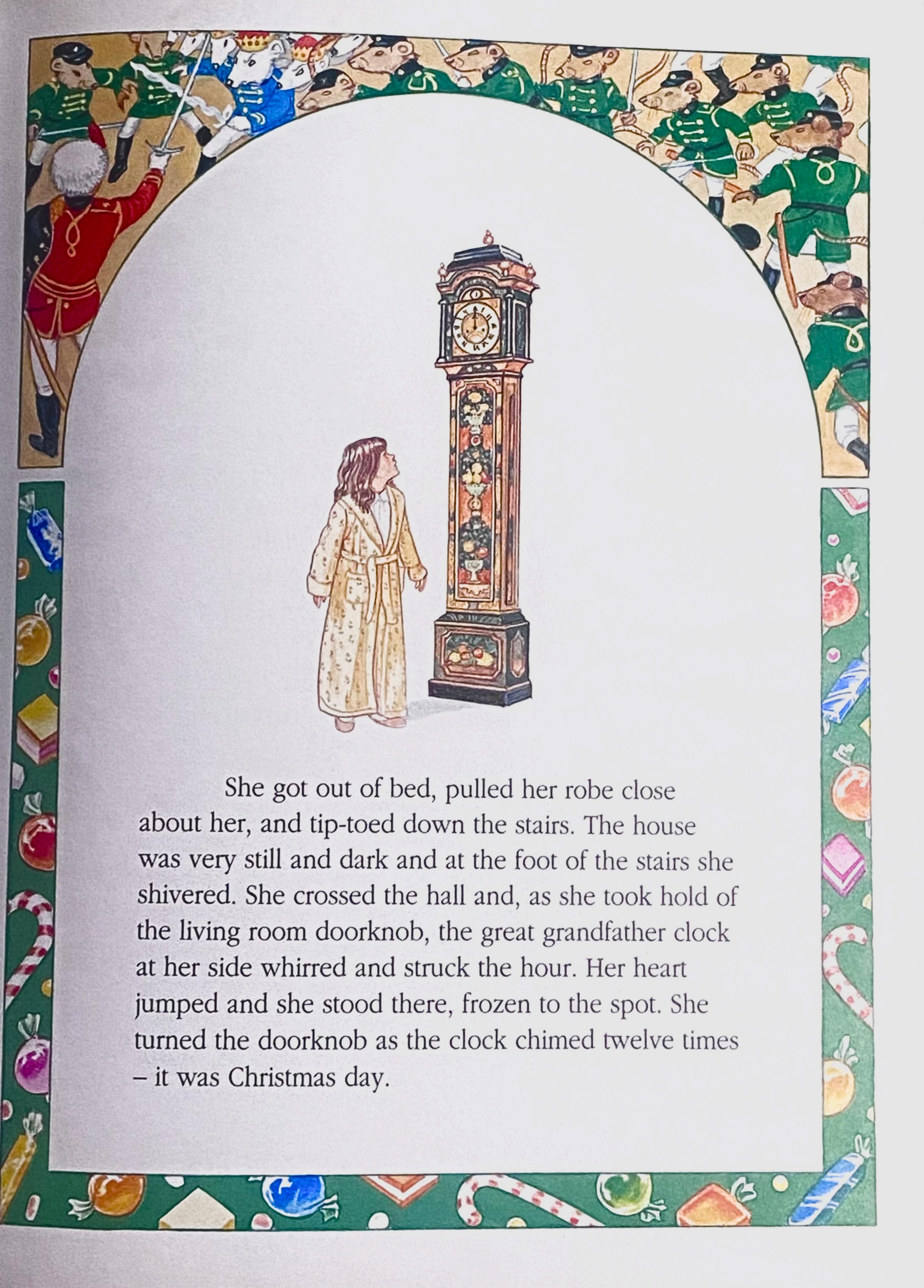




Marie was enchanted. She examined the hussar's uniform and operated the snapping teeth. But her enthusiasm was too much for Fritz. He had tired of his soldiers and he snatched the Nutcracker from her grasp. Forcing a huge nut between the soldier's jaws, he wrenched at the tiny collar. Three white teeth clattered to the floor and the Nutcracker's jaw hung loose and twisted.





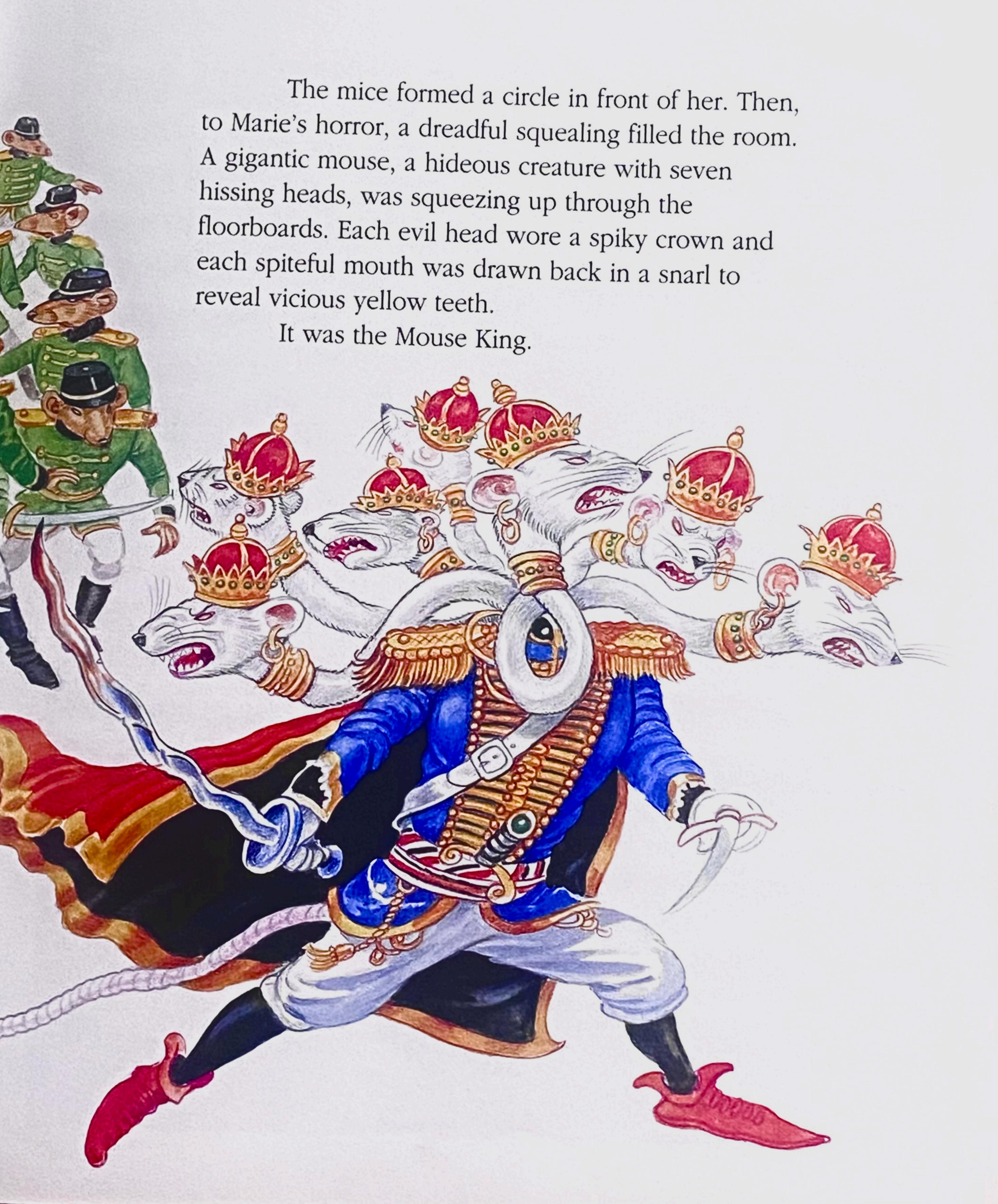




Marie entered the darkened living room. She opened the glass cabinet and lifted down the moongrey figure of the Nutcracker. She looked into his brave green eyes and placed him back on the shelf next to her favorite doll. Her trusted teddy bear was placed on his other side. Silently, she closed the cabinet and turned to retrace her steps.

Curiously, the room seemed larger and the darkness between herself and the door had become a black chasm. She stood very still, a chill shiver creeping up her back. Then she heard a noise – a rustling, scampering, scurrying noise that grew louder until it filled the whole room.

Marie held her breath and her heart pounded wildly. She peered into the blackness – tiny pin-pricks of light began to appear all around her. The lights were in pairs – a hundred pairs of tiny, shining eyes were staring at her. Everywhere she looked there were mice with gleaming eyes creeping closer and closer.



Marie was terrified and dared not move. The Mouse King held a fearsome sword, twisted and stained from a thousand battles. He swung it high over his head and the army of mice formed into ranks behind him. Marie stepped back and fell against the cabinet. Her elbow struck the glass and shattered one of the panes. As she fell to the ground she heard another sound, quiet and urgent:

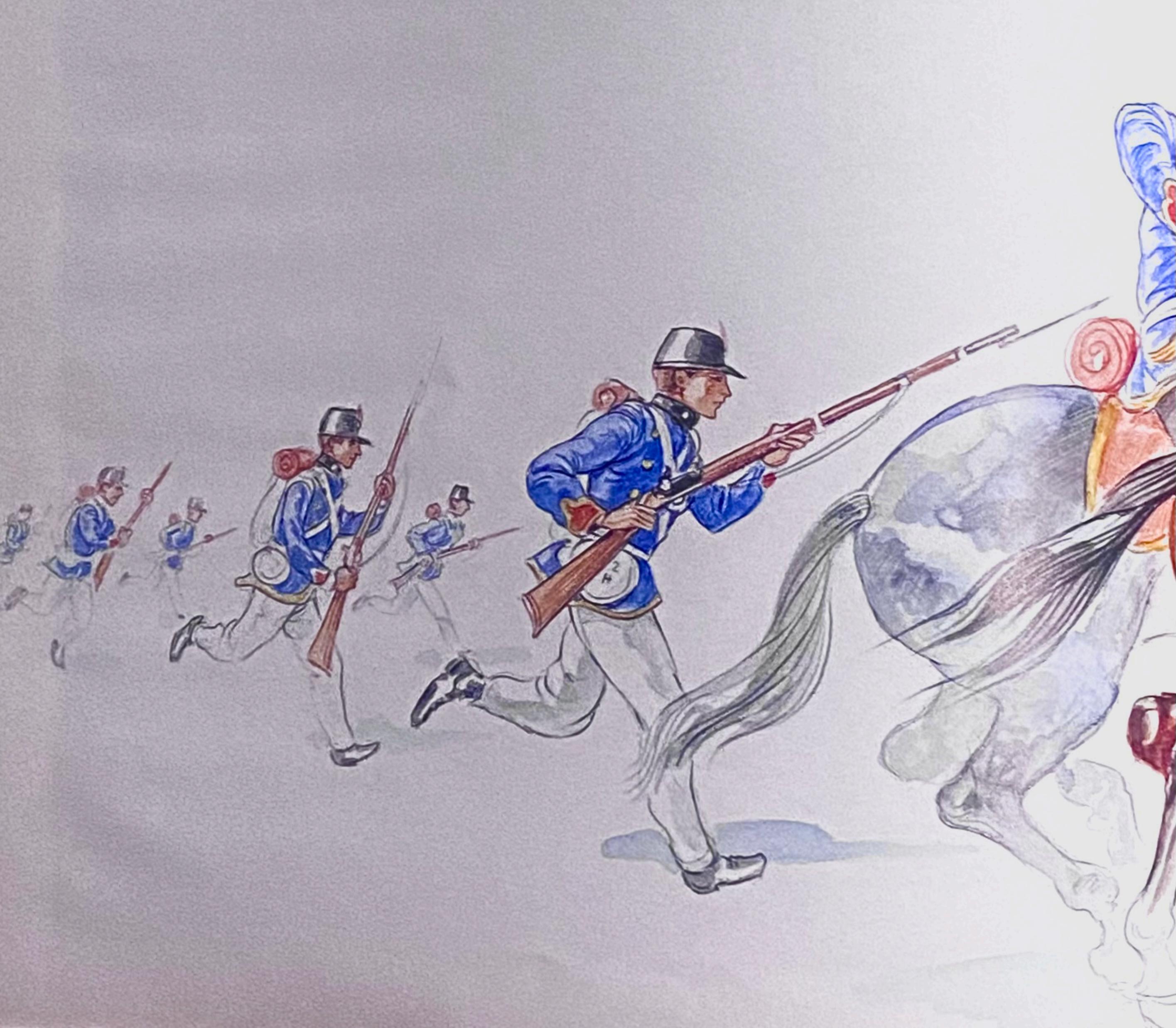
Come awake this night, To fight, to fight. Show steel, not fear, The Mouse King's here.

Marie looked up and saw that her toys had come to life on the shelves of the cabinet. The dolls were huddled together behind the teddy bear who stood bravely in front of them, looking anxiously down at the scene below. They clung together in fright, but striding along the shelf, his silver sword held high, was the Nutcracker. His broken jaw seemed mended now and his handsome face wore an expression of calm determination.

"To arms! To arms!" he called and Fritz's regiment of soldiers tumbled out of their boxes and hurried after him.

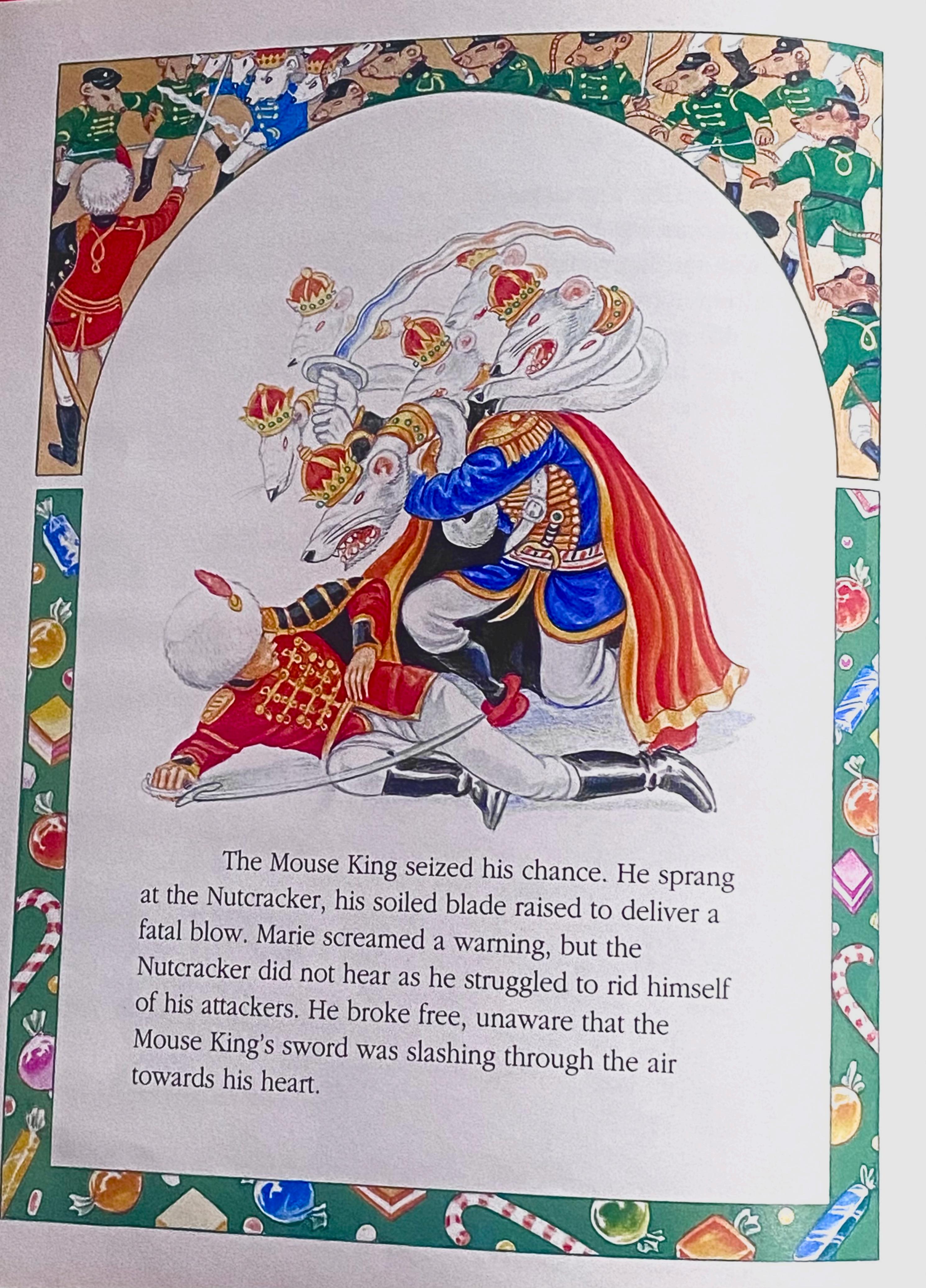


The Nutcracker leapt down from the cabinet and charged at the mouse army. His foot soldiers knelt in rows and fired off their muskets, smoke puffing from the tiny barrels. On either side the cavalry spurred on their horses and galloped towards the angry mice, their sabers scything the air. The two armies clashed and Marie watched as they engaged in a terrible battle.



The Nutcracker was fearless, calling out commands to his troops as he slashed and parried with the angry mice. Suddenly, his attention was diverted for a split second, and he was pounced on by a dozen ferocious mice. They pinned him down and thrust him back against the wall.

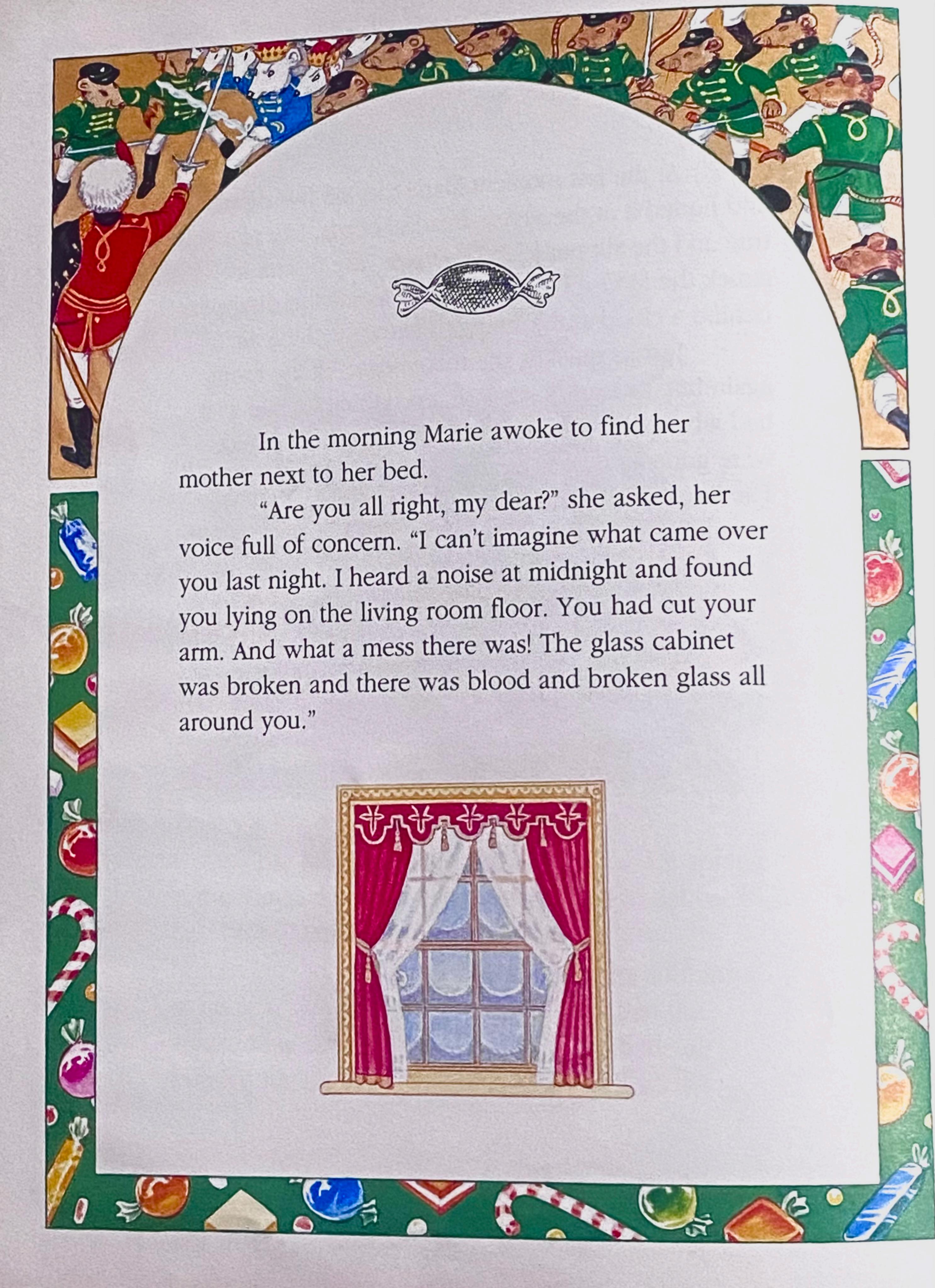


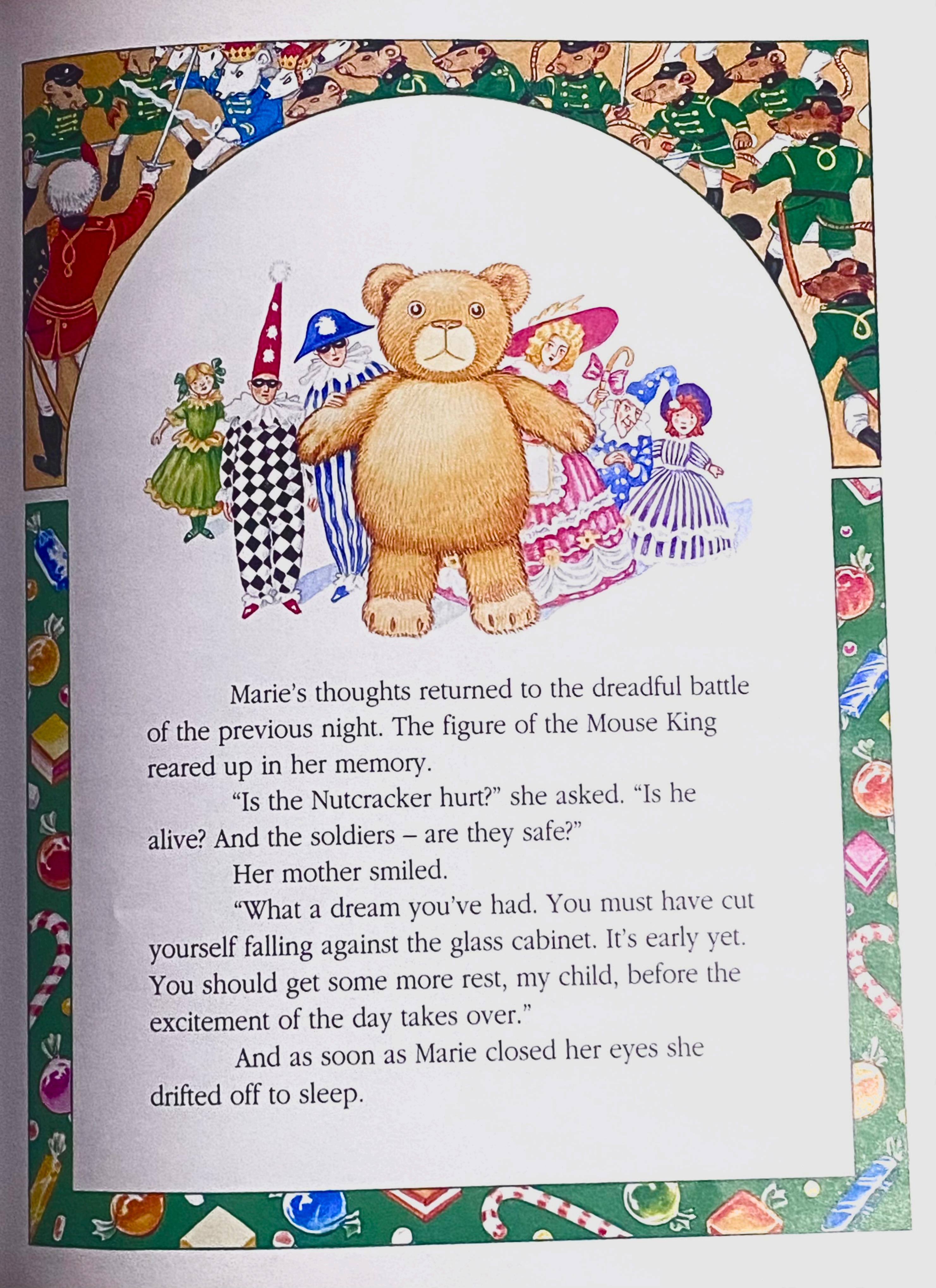


At the last moment Marie tore off her slipper and hurled it at the seven dreadful heads. Her aim was true and the slipper found its mark. The instant it struck the Mouse King, the moon seemed to disappear behind a cloud and a strange silence filled the air.

Just as quickly, the moonbeams lit the room again but, to Marie's surprise, everything looked as it had when she had first entered the room. The mice were gone and the toys were all back in their cabinet. The house was silent once more and Marie fell senseless to the floor.







Marie woke suddenly to the sound of a soft tap, tap, tap on her door. She got out of bed, dressed quickly and opened it. Her mouth fell open in surprise – standing in front of her was a handsome prince, dressed as a hussar. He looked exactly like...

The Nutcracker smiled and took her hand.

"Dearest Marie," he said. "I give you my warmest thanks. Last night you saved my life. When your slipper struck the Mouse King it broke the spell he had cast on me. I am no longer a toy, I am as I used to be and free to return to my palace in the Kingdom of Sweets."



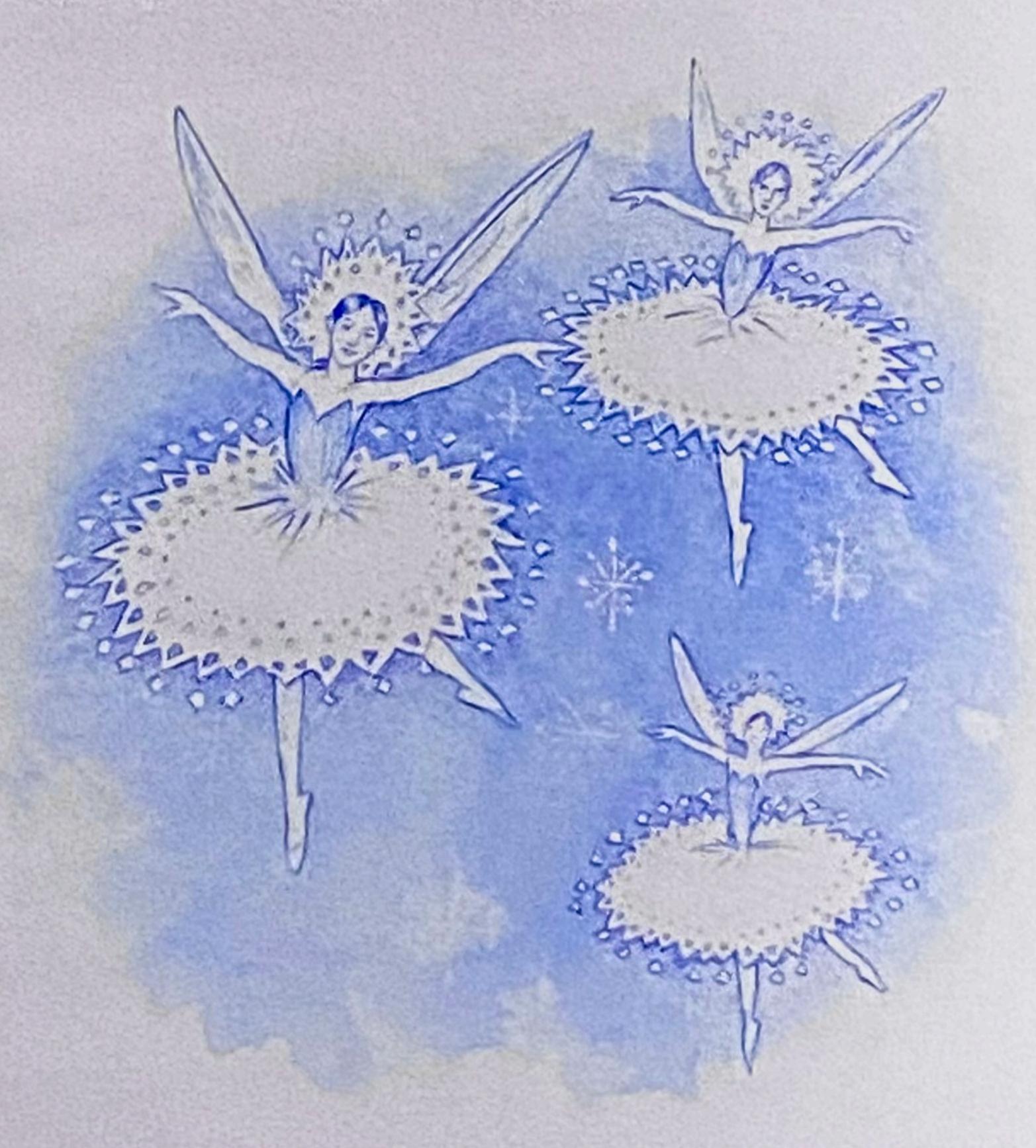
He drew her closer to him. "It is such a land of sweetness and beauty, I would be honored if you would agree to let me show it to you?"

Marie smiled into his handsome green eyes and nodded her head. She held on tightly to the prince's hand as he lifted her off the ground. They floated out of the window and high into the sky. Higher and higher they went and Marie looked down at the streets of the village and the tiny people scurrying about their business.



Soon, the village was far behind and they were drifting over a thick forest. The tall, snow-clad pines on the higher slopes seemed to reach up as if to touch them. It began to snow but Marie didn't feel in the least bit cold.

All around her the snowflakes swirled and danced. Marie looked closer and then laughed out loud – they really were dancing! Indeed, each and every snowflake had turned into a tiny fairy, dancing delicately in the crisp morning air.



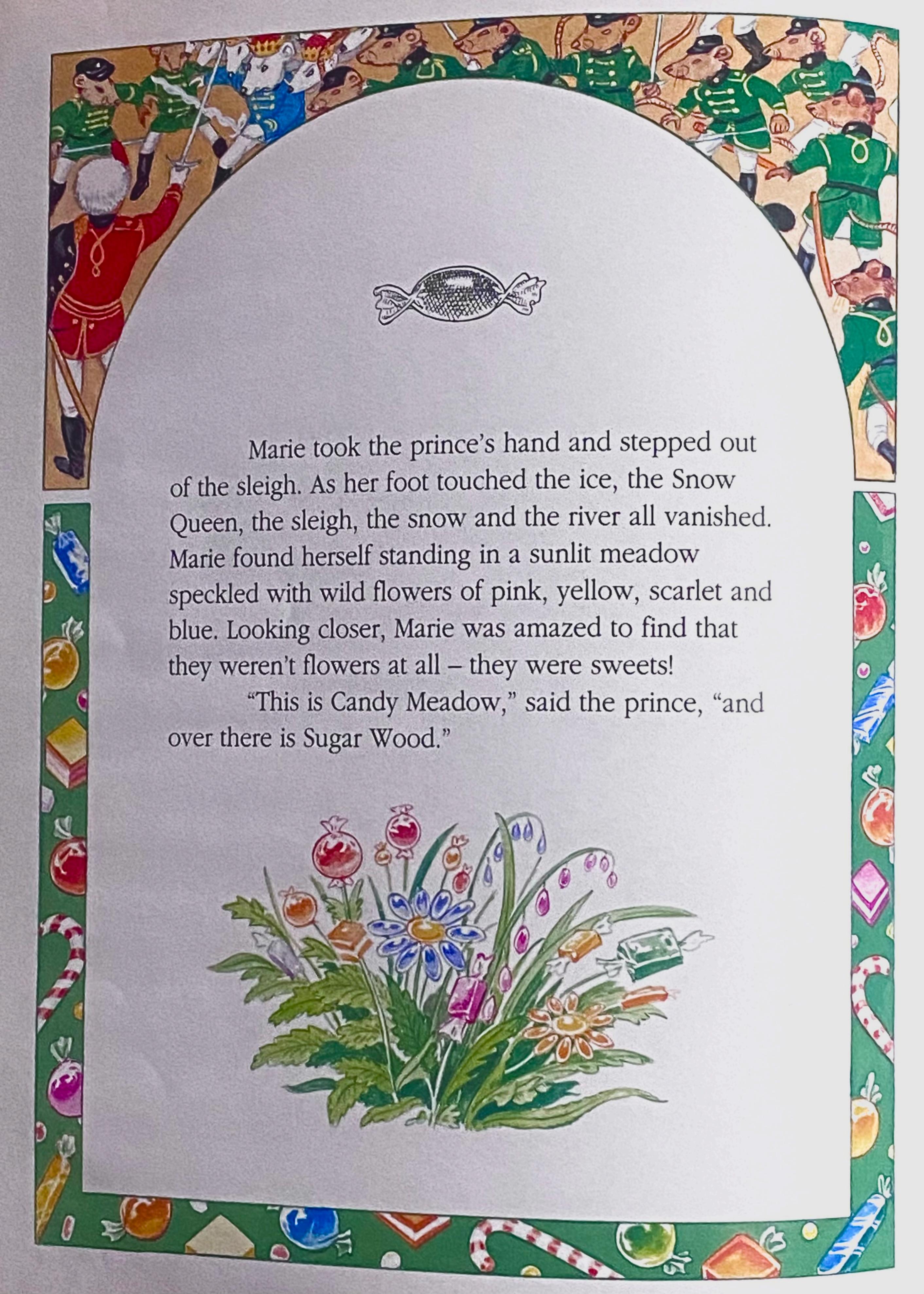


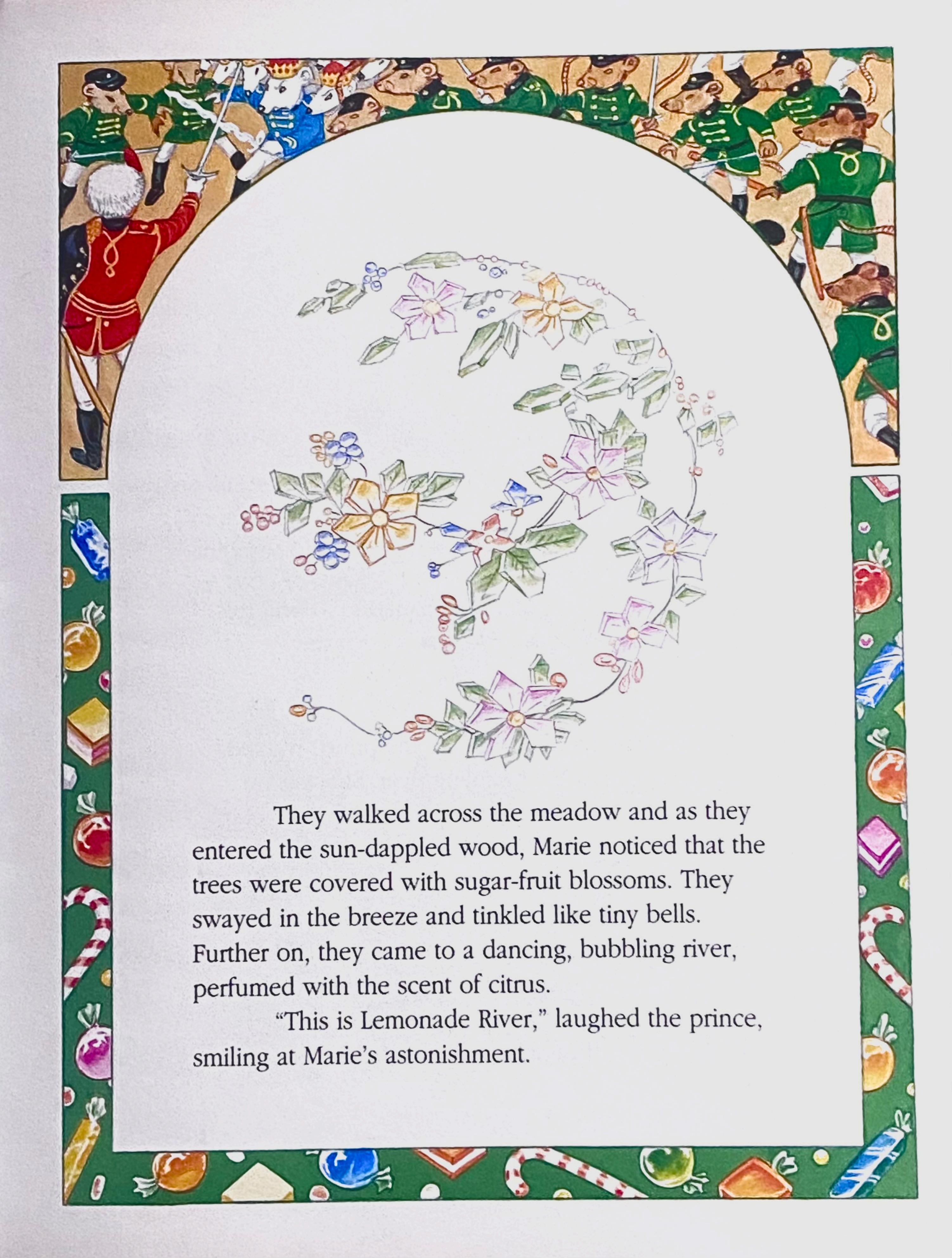


Immediately the snow fairies swooped down and formed themselves into a sleigh made entirely of ice. It took the three passengers high over snow-capped mountains and sheltered valleys where tiny villages huddled away from the wind. At last they glided down between the tall pine trees and landed on a wide, frozen river.

"This river will lead you to the Kingdom of Sweets," said the Queen.



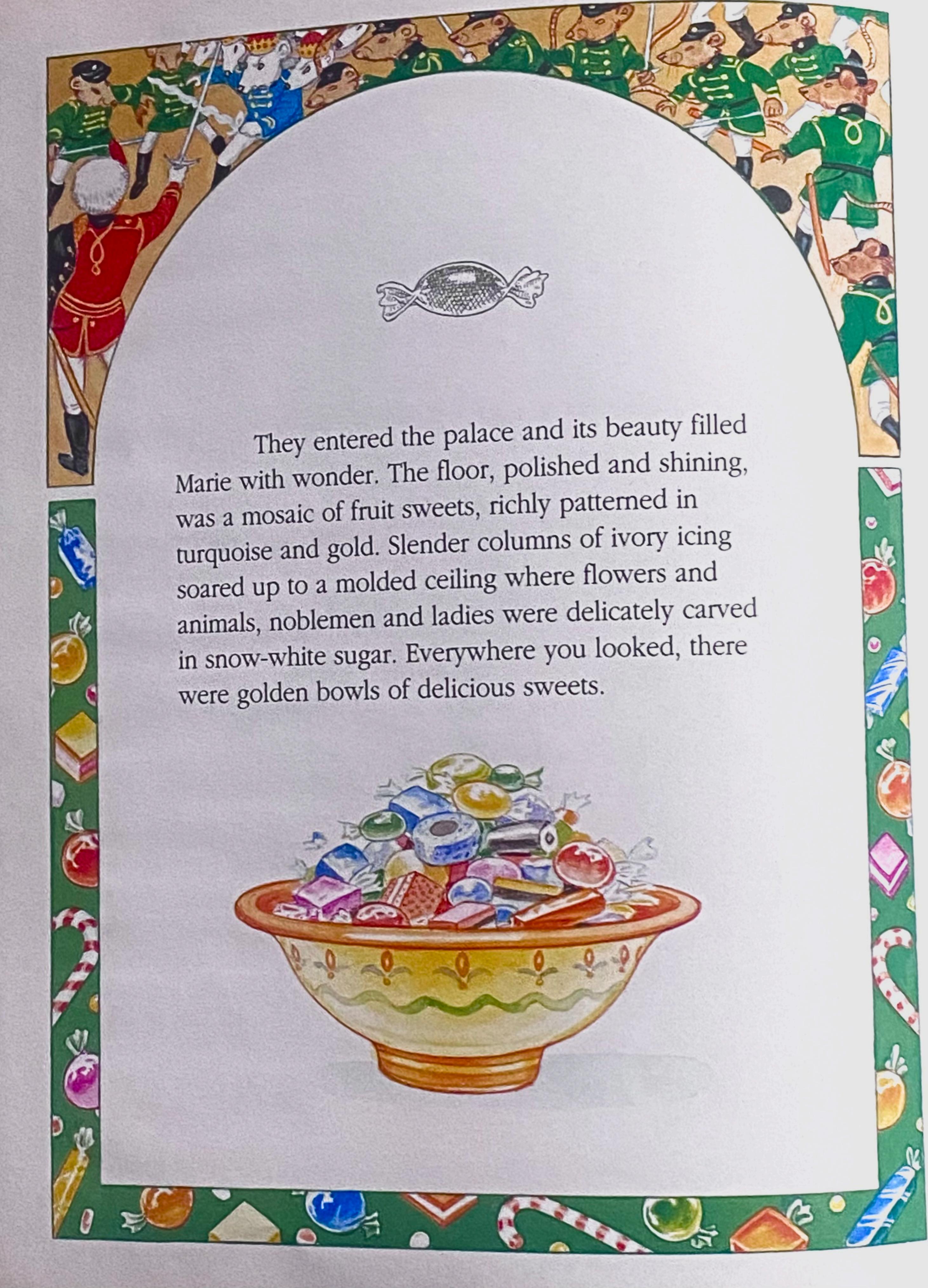


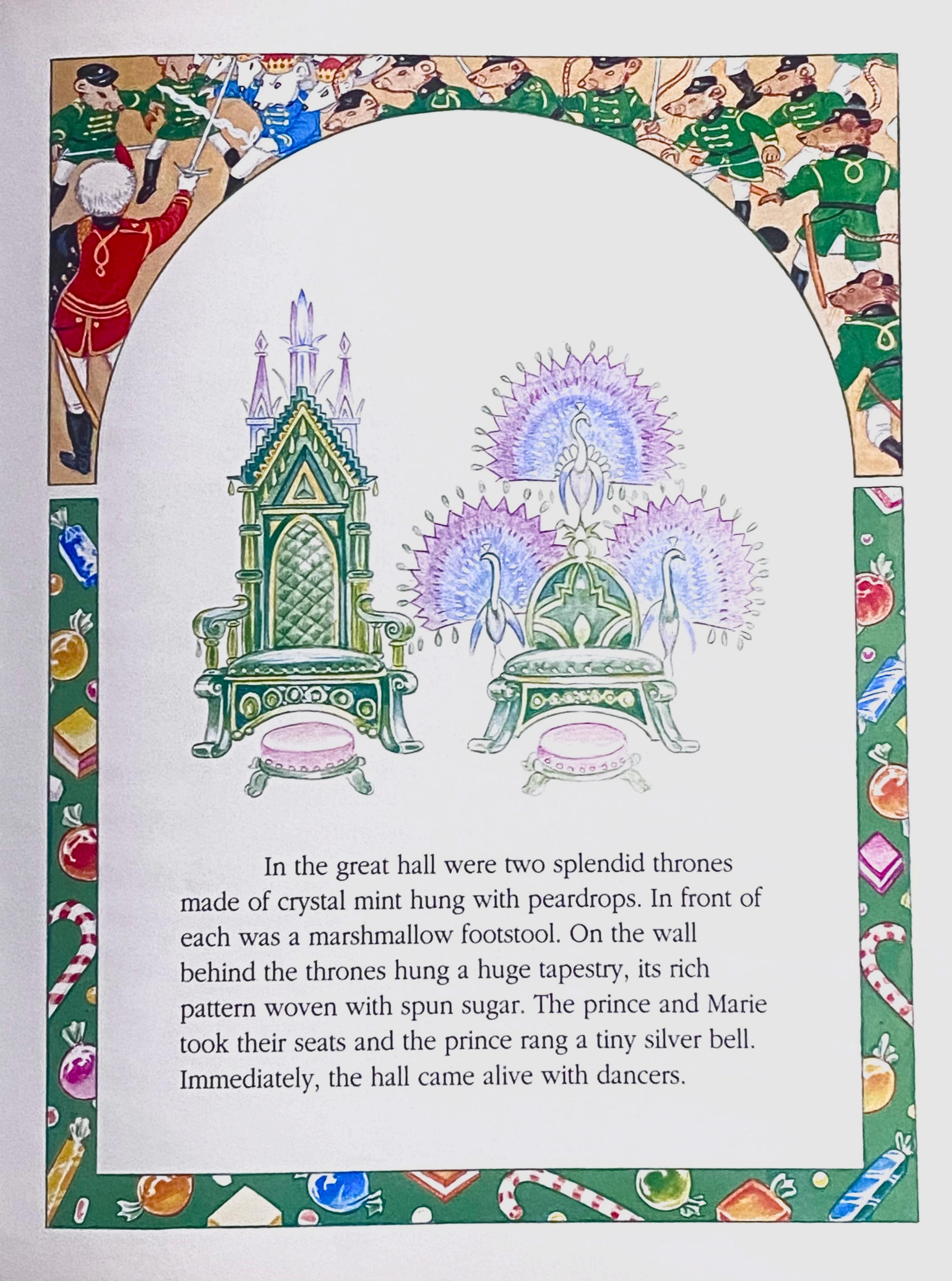




Hand in hand, Marie and the prince walked along the banks of the tumbling river. She was no longer surprised by the magic delights of this enchanted land. Tall sugar rushes grew in clumps from the marzipan banks; clusters of crimson jelly-fruits and yellow marshmallows dotted the cotton candy bushes, and outcrops of honey-colored toffee pushed through the sugar-spun grass. Beneath their feet was a pathway of caramel squares, each one neatly sealed with peppermint cream.







To begin with came maidens and milkmaids, dancing with herdsmen and hunters. Then a high-stepping Spaniard came stamping and stretching, followed by a gilded Sheik who shimmered like the desert sun. Next, came bobbing, silk-wrapped maids from faraway China, as pale as porcelain, smiling and leaning like reeds in a breeze. A bounding, leaping Cossack whirled and flew like a top across the floor and dizzied the watching assembly. He was joined by a team of laughing children in colorful costume who linked arms to march around the hall.



Then the crowds drew back and a whisper ran around the hall. Marie clapped her hands in delight as in danced a sugar-plum fairy. She floated and lifted as if she was thistledown blown on a summer's day breeze. Around and around the great hall she danced, entrancing all who watched her delicate ballet.

When her dance was over, the prince took Marie gently by the hand and led her down to the ballroom floor.

"May I have the pleasure of this last dance?" he asked as enchanting music once again filled the hall.



Marie closed her eyes as the prince waltzed her around the room. She was so happy as she danced in his arms that her feet felt as light as a feather. Her ears were full of sweet music and her senses reeled with the perfume of a thousand blossoms. But gradually the music and the perfume faded, drifting away as she spun in a whirl of happiness. She could feel instead the warmth of the sun on her face.

Then came a thud and a tumbling bump.

THE STORY OF THE NUTCRACKER

Marie opened her eyes. She was back in her bedroom, sitting on the floor beneath the open window. The morning sunshine was streaming in on her face.

"Dear Nutcracker," she murmured. "He has brought me safely home."



